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## THE ECONOMIC HISTORY OF AMERICAN AGRICULTURE AS A FIELD FOR STUDY<sup>1</sup>

History, like all other studies, has repeatedly undergone significant changes in point of view and in methods of interpretation. Formerly, it was regarded as a narrative of past events, and its chief purpose was to interest and amuse the reader, rather than to contribute to a well considered body of scientific knowledge. This conception of history, however, has been greatly changed during the past fifty years by the introduction of the scientific method in historical investigation. The main objective of this method is the critical study of the past life of humanity, not only for its own sake, but also for the sake of enabling us to understand better the present life of the times of which we ourselves are a part. It has led students to search beneath the surface of passing events and to study the institutional life of society; in other words, the common everyday life of humanity. It has brought about a reconstruction of the whole field of history with the result that all phases of human progress are being studied and presented in a new light. It conceives of history as a social science whose concern is the scientific study of the past life of human society in its economic, social, religious, political, military, æsthetic, and intellectual phases.

The application of the scientific method to the study of American history has brought out more clearly the significance of the economic forces underlying our national development. It has been only a few years since the histories of the United States treated merely the political, military, and religious phases of American life, while the economic and social were neglected, if not altogether ignored; and this in spite of the fact that the latter have been constantly gaining in importance with our material progress and have formed, further, the real essence of our most crucial political questions. We need only refer to the slavery

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented before the American history section of the American historical association, Washington, D. C., December 28, 1915.

question with its many complications, or consider the debates on the public lands, internal improvements, the United States bank, the tariff, the currency, immigration, the organization of labor, and the regulation of corporations, to show what an important part economic questions have played in American politics.

To-day, economic and social problems are pressing for solution; and questions of government are becoming to an ever increasing extent, economic rather than political. The scientific spirit is making new demands upon the past. It wants to know a thousand things concerning which annalists in former times were not curious. Whereas historians have hitherto interrogated the past concerning the doings of generals, politicians, and churchmen, they are now coming to search for information concerning such matters as the tenure of public and private land, the migrations of settlers and of crop areas, the rise of trades unions and farmers' organizations, the growth of corporations, the status of the negro, and the advance of education. The rising school of economic historians is responding to the demands of a new age and the history of our country is being reexplored and rewritten in order that we may not only know more about the past, but also that we may better understand the present with its complex economic and social problems: in other words, that we may better interpret our own times in the light of economic and social evolution.

Of fundamental significance in the scientific study of American development is the economic history of our agriculture. This phase of our history has not hitherto received the attention at the hands of historians which its importance merits. It is time, therefore, first, to define the economic history of American agriculture as a field for study; second, to review some of the reasons why special attention should be directed to this field; and, third, to suggest some of the more important problems which this field offers for investigation.

The economic history of American agriculture includes much more than a mere account of progress in the technique of agriculture. It is concerned with all the facts, forces, and conditions which have entered into the development of agriculture in the United States, from the founding of Jamestown to the Pan-American exposition. It deals with the influences affecting the

evolution of agriculture and of agricultural society in different sections; the problems engaging the attention of the rural population in various periods; the relation of agriculture to other industries; the contributions of the agricultural population to the professions, to politics, and to legislation; and the influences of our agricultural development on our national life. It includes the study of the whole life of the rural population, economic, social, moral, religious, intellectual, and political. Viewed in one way, the history of the United States from the beginning has been in a very large measure the story of rural communities advancing westward by the conquest of the soil, developing from a state of primitive self-sufficiency to a capitalistic and highly complex agricultural organization.

These preliminary considerations show the broad scope of the economic history of American agriculture as a field for study. What then are some of the more important reasons for directing attention to this field?

It almost goes without saying, that agriculture is the fundamental basis of our prosperity. The greater portion of our population has always dwelt in rural communities. According to the census, the rural population in 1790 represented ninety-six and seven-tenths per cent of the total; in 1880, seventy and five-tenths per cent; and in 1910, fifty-three and seven-tenths per cent; thus it still constitutes more than half of the whole population. In 1910, thirty-four and six-tenths per cent of the population was engaged directly in the cultivation of the soil: a greater proportion than is engaged in any other occupation. The value of farm property as compared with that of manufacturing, transportation, forestry, and mining industries also emphasizes the great prominence of agriculture; and finally, the study of cycles in business prosperity indicates that our general well-being has always been dependent on this industry.

As has already been suggested, a study of the economic history of American agriculture is indispensable to a correct understanding of much of our political and diplomatic history. A consideration of the effect of cotton and slavery on the whole history of party politics from the adoption of the constitution down to the civil war, or of the rapid growth of the wheat industry in its relation to the organization of a farmers' party and

the effect of this party movement on national legislation, as evidenced, for instance, by the interstate commerce act of 1887 and the Sherman anti-trust act of 1890, will give anyone an appreciation of the fact that in order to understand our political history, no little attention must be given to the economic history of agriculture. A consideration of the influence of the agricultural industry on our foreign relations and the making of commercial and other treaties will further emphasize this same fact. It was the demand of the southwestern farmers for the free and unrestricted navigation of the Mississippi which led directly to the purchase of Louisiana from Napoleon. It was the interference with American shipping and the seizure of American food products which led to the war of 1812. It has been generally conceded that England's need of cotton was chiefly responsible for that country's sympathetic attitude toward the south during the civil war; it is equally significant that her imperative need of northern wheat operated effectively to keep England officially neutral. These illustrations are sufficient to suggest the importance of our agrarian history in the study of American diplomacy; our nation's historians have been too much inclined to take a provincial view of the national past: the "shortview," as the late Rear-admiral Mahan has expressed it. It is time to abandon this attitude, and to take the larger or the "long-view" of the forces which have shaped our destinies.

Our agricultural history offers an excellent opportunity for the study of the lives and services of eminent men who have profoundly affected American economic development. Consider the influence of Eli Whitney on the history of the cotton industry, or that of Cyrus Hall McCormick on the history of cereal production. It is not too much to say that the triumph of the north over the south in 1865 was the triumph of the reaper over the cotton gin, and that McCormick and Whitney deserve as great a place in American history as U. S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. Or consider the influence of Franklin, Washington, and Jefferson on the early formation of agricultural societies; of Thomas H. Benton and Galusha A. Grow on the movement for free homesteads for actual settlers; of Senator Morrill on the establishment of colleges of agriculture and mechanic arts; of O. H. Kelly on the granger movement; of General James B. Weaver

on the organization of a farmers' party; and of P. G. Holden, "the corn wizard," on the development of rural extension work and the popularization of better farming methods. These names will suggest at once a host of other Americans who have contributed to the development of the farming industry; our agrarian history is rich in the personal element.

It further furnishes a background for the study of agricultural economics. It is recognized that economic science bears about the same relation to economic history that political science bears to political history. The value of political history to the political scientist is so obvious as to require no defense. It is equally evident that agricultural economics, a science which is of recent origin, must have an historical foundation and background. The agricultural economist needs to be familiar with the economic life of man in the past in order to realize and appreciate the organic nature of society. He should be historically minded if he would deal most efficiently with the problems of the present. With the introduction of the science of agricultural economics into the land grant colleges and universities of the country, therefore, comes a new motive for productive work in the field of agricultural history.

The history of American agriculture, then, is essential to the development of a sound and farsighted rural economy. The great problems of rural communities are human rather than merely materialistic. That is to say, they are economic, social, and educational, and cannot be understood except in the light of their historical evolution. Government action involving agricultural interests should be based on a broad knowledge of rural economic history. Questions of land tenure, tenancy, size of farms, markets (including the complex problems of distribution and exchange), capitalistic agriculture, the rise of land values, rural credits, farmers' organizations with their economic, social, intellectual, and political functions, the rural school, the rural church, and good roads: these are only a few of the vital problems which should be considered from an historical and comparative as well as from a purely technical point of view. Rural problems will henceforth demand a superior type of statesmanship, for we are to-day rapidly passing through a great transition period of our history. We have emerged from the period

of colonization, of exploitation, of extensive development, and have entered the period of intensive development. There is a greater need than ever for calling upon the wisdom and experience of the past in the working out of a sound and farsighted rural economy. We are in need of a scientific treatment of the economic history of agriculture in this country to help supply this need.

The subject, thus outlined, presents an inviting field for study and investigation. Although it has been neglected, not to say almost entirely ignored, by our nation's historians, it is encouraging to note an awakening interest in this direction. Some of the leading institutions of the country, particularly Harvard, Wisconsin, and Columbia, are directing research work in this field, and a few of these institutions have begun to offer courses on the subject. At the Iowa state college, for example, such a course is offered, and it is required in the various departments of the division of agriculture, in addition to the course in agricultural economics. Mention should also be made of the work now being undertaken by the department of economics and sociology of the Carnegie institution at Washington, under whose auspices a number of published and unpublished monographs in the economic history of American agriculture have already been prepared. Under its direction, the materials are being collected for a comprehensive history of American agriculture which will serve as an encyclopedia on the subject. These contributions, however, represent merely the pioneer undertakings, which will need to be supplemented by numerous studies if the economic history of American agriculture is to be properly emphasized and recorded. The limits of this paper will permit only a brief consideration of some of the more important problems which await the labors of the historian.

Among these subjects, that of the public lands commands primary consideration. The entire land area of continental United States amounts to 1,903,289,600 acres. Of this area, forty-six and two-tenths per cent, or 878,798,325 acres, have been carved out into farms. The remainder consists of forests and mineral holdings and reserves, land occupied by towns and cities, railroad rights of way, public highways, mountainous country, and arid and swamp lands. There remain unreserved and unappro-

priated only 290,000,000 acres, the great portion of which will never be available for agricultural purposes.

The transference of the originally vast heritage from public to private ownership is of fundamental significance; its history should include a consideration of early French, Spanish, and English land grants to individuals and to colonial corporations, of colonial systems of land disposal, and of the various methods by which the national and state governments have disposed of public lands to the settler, to the "land grabber," and to the speculator. A review of the federal land policy presents the story of a long and bitter contest between the east and the west, culminating in the triumph of the latter in the enactment of the preëemption law of 1841, and the homestead act of 1862. This struggle was involved with other public questions: the protective tariff, New England's primary concern; and slavery, the major interest of the south. The ascendancy of the slavery issue after the Mexican war brought the east to the support of the west in opposition to slavery extension, and in the demand for free homesteads which was inserted in the republican platform of 1860. Representative Lovejoy of Illinois is authority for the statement that without this plank Lincoln could not have been elected. With the secession of the southern states, the enactment of the homestead law was assured. But congress and the land office, in devising the liberal land policy, did not guard the rights of the actual settler against land pirates. Ruthless spoliation was practiced until all the best lands were gone. Recent tendencies in land legislation indicate an intention on the part of the government to revert to the original purpose of the law of 1862, and to assign free homesteads only to actual settlers.

The rapid disposal of the swamp land grants, the internal improvement and railway grants, the section grants for common schools, and the land grants for colleges of agriculture and mechanic arts under the Morrill act of 1862, as well as the location and final disposition of these lands, suggest important studies to be made in public land history. The history of the forest lands (including forest reserves and national parks), and of the mineral and the saline lands also is waiting to be written. Finally, the disposition of lands under the timber culture act, the



desert land act, the timber and stone act, the Carey act, the reclamation act, and the Kinkaid act, may be mentioned as profitable subjects for investigation.

Fifty years ago there was little or no occasion for careful consideration of the land question. Land was to be had for nothing, and there was plenty of it. Congress was not much concerned as to how rapidly or how unwisely the vast national heritage was spent. The speculative spirit seems to have become ingrained as one of the chief American characteristics; it has contributed to an inflation of land values, and to the present high rate of tenancy. The land question has therefore entered upon a new and complex phase. In undertaking an equitable solution of this problem, the history of the land under both public and private ownership should be investigated. In essaying this task, it should be kept in mind that the disappearance of the public lands is closely linked with the rapid increase of population, the change from extensive to intensive farming, and the increased cost of living.

The history of specific leading industries also remains to be written. As examples of what may be done in this direction we may indicate Hammond's "Cotton industry" and Thompson's "Rise and decline of the wheat growing industry in Wisconsin." Similar studies should be undertaken for cereal and live stock production, the latter including dairying and meat packing. The tobacco, poultry, and beet sugar industries should also be mentioned as profitable fields for research. The history of the range should be a particularly interesting subject for investigation. Such a study should give special attention to influences affecting the rise and growth of the industry, such as soil and climate, early trade and commerce, labor, tenancy, the use of improved machinery, markets, prices, transportation, and the tariff; and the relation of the industry to industries such as transportation, manufactures, mining, and lumbering should be considered. The westward movement of the centre of production should be studied in its relation to the westward movement of population and the accessibility of markets. The influence of agricultural prices on production, and the influence of grain markets on national politics and finance should receive careful study. Mr. Turner has called attention to the importance of the study of the wheat industry, in the following terms:

"If, for example, we study the maps showing the transition of the wheat belt from the East to the West, as the virgin soils were conquered and made new bases for destructive competition with the older wheat states, we shall see how deeply they affected not only land values, railroad building, the movement of population and the supply of cheap food, but also how the regions once devoted to single cropping of wheat were forced to turn to varied and intensive agriculture and to diversified industry, and we shall see also how these transformations affected party politics and even the ideals of the Americans of the regions thus changed."<sup>2</sup>

The economic history of agriculture in particular states or in given regions should also be written. Such studies should include the consideration of agricultural geography, Indian agriculture, early trade and travel, relations of the white race with the Indian, pioneer population and agriculture, nearness to the markets, transportation of agricultural products, development of specialized and diversified farming, systems of land tenure, agricultural labor, use of improved farm machinery, size of farms, price of lands, and rentals, and laws governing inheritance of real estate in lands. These studies would naturally include also the consideration of the sources of immigration, the type of farmers, the methods of agriculture, and the social phases of life, including religion, education, amusements, and entertainments. Attention should be given to currency and banking facilities, rural credit, rates of interest, and the relation of the farming population to national monetary legislation and to the tariff. The subject of agricultural education should receive extended treatment: a study of state agricultural societies and fairs, the agricultural press, and the agricultural colleges and experiment stations, including rural extension departments and recently introduced courses in agriculture in the high schools. Finally, the economic history of agriculture of any state should present an historical and comparative analysis of the problems confronting the farming class. Mr. E. V. Robinson's "Economic history of agriculture in Minnesota," just published, suggests the possibilities and the value of this type of study. Similar studies might indeed profitably be made of

<sup>2</sup> F. J. Turner, "Social forces in American history" in the *American historical review*, 16: 229, 230.

larger areas, as for example, a given region like the middle west.

The history of farmers' organizations should be given considerable attention in view of the recent active interest which is being awakened in the various forms of farmers' coöperative unions and enterprises. Studies of this kind may be divided into two groups: first, those dealing with organizations which seek to combine the farmers as a class, as illustrated by the grange; and, secondly, those treating of organizations which serve some special end or industry, as for example the coöperative creameries, and farmers' elevators. For such a study it would be necessary to investigate the origin, purpose, growth, difficulties, successes, and failures of the various organizations. European ideals and methods introduced by the immigrant farmer should be studied. The influence of the organization on state and national politics and legislation should be given due weight. The recent appearance of Mr. S. J. Buck's monograph on "The granger movement" marks a distinctive contribution to the history of farmers' organizations. Studies of this kind will contribute very materially to a proper understanding of the farmers' coöperative movement in this country, and will point the way to more successful and fruitful efforts along that line in the future.

Still other problems awaiting the labors of the historian are readily suggested; mention may be made of the history of farm machinery, foreign immigration and its influence on the development of agriculture, agricultural labor, transportation of agricultural products, markets and prices, the relation of agriculture to financial legislation, taxation and the tariff, and agricultural education. The relation of agriculture to other given industries, the relation of the state to agriculture, and the work of the department of agriculture may also be suggested.

After all is said, however, the fundamental reason why the economic history of American agriculture should be studied is that we may ultimately have a well balanced history of our nation. For it must be remembered, as I have already tried to show, that our agrarian history is to be viewed not in the strict or narrow sense, but in the broad sense so as to include the whole life of the rural population, the influences which have affected

its progress, and the influence its progress has in turn had on the course of events. Thus defined, the economic history of American agriculture is a constituent part of the history of the entire people, closely interwoven with other phases of our national progress; and to define it is to emphasize a new point of view in the study of American development. "The marking out of such a field is only a fresh example of the division of scientific labour: it is the provisional isolation, for the better investigation of them, of a particular group of facts and forces," in order that a true history of our national progress and development may finally be written.

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